UPDATE: Reactions to the Dismissal of Black AIDS Institute's CEO

HIV community leaders demand Raniyah Copeland be reinstated and that the Black AIDS Institute fill vacant seats on the board.

August 27, 2021 By Trent Straube

Editor's note: The below article, originally published August 23, has been updated to include the sign-on letter from community leaders demanding accountability at Black AIDS Institute (BAI) and the reinstatement of its CEO. Phill Wilson, the former president and CEO of BAI, also has released a statement.

Business is not proceeding as usual at the Black AIDS Institute (BAI), a national nonprofit headquartered in Los Angeles and focused on HIV education, prevention and treatment among African Americans.

"Raniyah Copeland no longer serves as our chief executive officer," reads an August 20 letter addressed to the BAI community and signed by Grazell R. Howard, the chair of the board of directors at BAI.

In related news, earlier this month, Copeland, MPH, was among eight new members to join the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA).

Meanwhile, a group of four HIV activists—all current or former board members—launched a petition on Change.org urging the BAI board to resign and make way for a new board to govern the organization.

Several days later, a group of leaders in the broader HIV community published a sign-on letter via Google Docs urging that Copeland be reinstated and that the Board should be filled with people living with HIV, Black cis and trans women, Black men, youth, representatives from HIV organizations and intersecting movements.

The text of the Change.org petition offers a glimpse into the behind-the-scenes turmoil at the institute. It reads in part:

> After much soul-searching and countless attempts to intervene over the course of eight months, we, as current and immediate past board members of the Black AIDS Institute, are

> calling on the wholesale resignation and reconstitution of BAI's Board of Directors. We have taken every action we can think of to convince BAI's Board Chair and our other board colleagues to do the right things, hoping reason and healthy discourse and debate would prevail.
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> In vain, we have implored our colleagues to protect the staff and organization from harm, and to practice good governance. The lack of attention to corporate governance has resulted in a dwindling number of elected board members, an autocratic Board culture, and caused elevated risk for the corporation and its staff. The last time the Board held officer elections was in 2017 and the last time the Board elected a new board member was in 2016. The board is now down to nine board members. All current board members have exceeded their three-year term of office. The new Board must be representative of the communities it serves; protect the staff and corporation from harm; hold regularly scheduled board meetings; maintain complete, timely, and accurate board minutes and meeting recordings; update bylaws; and reinstate regularly occurring officer, committee chair, and new member elections. The lack of action on staff safety is most alarming and why we believe the time has come for BAI to build a new board.
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> In January 2021, BAI's President and CEO brought charges of bullying, harassment and creating a hostile work environment against her supervisor, BAI's Board Chair. When an employee brings a harassment charge against a supervisor, best practice, good governance, and California labor law are quite clear. The organization must (1) immediately respond to the employee's complaint and inform them of their rights; (2) conduct a timely, objective, impartial, and unbiased investigation in response to their grievance, without retaliation; and (3) protect the employee from retaliation by removing the employee from the accused supervisor's supervision until the conclusion of the investigation.
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> Though the allegations surfaced in January, the Board Chair and most of the executive committee obfuscated, manipulated, and exercised unethical controls over the process to slow or bury the required investigation. They ultimately launched a campaign to purge the board of all dissenting voices, beginning with the vice chair, who was summarily pushed off the governing body for demanding the board conduct the state mandated investigation of the allegations. The required investigation has yet to occur and the board chair remains, for all intents and purposes, the CEO's supervisor, eight months after allegations surfaced.

Many further details are included in the petition, which was submitted by Gina Brown (executive committee member), Marlene McNeese (executive committee member), David Ernesto Munar (clinical committee chair) and Vanessa Williams (former vice chair).

Meanwhile, the August 20 letter from the chair of the board of directors reads in full:

> Dear Black AIDS Institute Community, Stakeholders, Partners and Supporters:

> Yesterday the board of directors voted to move forward with a leadership reorganization for the Black AIDS Institute which has been contemplated since January of this year. In doing so, we are announcing Raniyah Copeland no longer serves as our Chief Executive Officer.
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> We thank Ms. Copeland for her service to BAI during a critical time in our organization's history, and especially during an unprecedented and challenging time in our country. We wish her the best in her future endeavors.
>
> BAI is redefining to better focus on the policies and resources that advance our national agenda to combat HIV/AIDS. We plan to engage a nationally recognized executive search firm to help us identify a new, permanent Chief Executive Officer who has the necessary skill sets for the position and the vision to lead us into the future as we strive to end the HIV epidemic in Black communities. You will hear more on this in the coming weeks.
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> While the nation is grappling with the constant impact of COVID-19, which is disproportionately impacting the Black community and those living with HIV, we must not lose any time or focus on the task to save lives and achieve viral suppression of HIV in our community. Since the start of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, HIV has claimed nearly 300,000 African American lives. Biomedical advances and tools exist today to radically change the trajectory of the virus and improve the lives of persons living with HIV. Blacks still account for approximately 42% of all new infections. We have much more work to do.
>
> The leadership and work of BAI is essential to save lives. Thank you for your commitment to BAI and I look forward to our continued partnership.
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> Yours in the journey to thriving,
>
> Grazell R. Howard, Chair
>
> Board of Directors
>
> Black AIDS Institute

In response to these developments, a sign-on letter from HIV community leaders seeks signatures from individuals and organizations who believe Copeland should be reinstated and the BAI plays a vital role in combating the HIV epidemic. The sign-on letter reads, in part:

> Our concerns are twofold: to ensure the survival of BAI as the only large nationally focused Black organization in the country dedicated to ending the HIV epidemic in Black communities, and to demand Board accountability to Black communities and people living with HIV. To do

> this, the Board must fill all vacant seats on the Board with people living with HIV, Black cis and trans women, Black men, youth, representatives from HIV organizations and intersecting movements. The longstanding Board must step down as soon as new Board members are seated and the entire Board must comply with its bylaws and hold elections for new officers. Further, we demand that Raniyah Copeland be reinstated as CEO of BAI.
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> In her two years at the head of BAI, Raniyah has masterfully overseen the expansion of the organization and the implementation of visionary new programs to address the lack of racial equity within HIV policy and research work. Realizing that the new federal Ending the HIV Epidemic initiative would fail without explicitly including Black leadership, she leveraged the resources and talented staff of BAI to launch the We the People report and broader programmatic work, introducing an unapologetically Black narrative into a national HIV policy environment that continues to represent Black and Brown communities poorly. Under Raniyah's leadership, the Black Treatment Action Networks (BTAN) have been revived and BTAN chapters are organizing around the country. BTANs and BAI are visible in the South and actively represent the issues of the South at decision making tables.…
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> The HIV community demands an organization whose board supports excellence, is reflective of communities most impacted by the epidemic, uplifts the racial injustices that are key drivers of the epidemic and is unapologetic in its work to end the epidemic among Black people.

There's much more to read in the letter.

For a collection of POZ articles on BAI, click the hashtag #Black AIDS Institute. You'll find articles such as "Racial Justice Index: A New Tool to Combat Racism Within HIV Groups," "Our Solution: The Black AIDS Institute hosts a conversation with Anthony Fauci, MD, on COVID-19 and HIV" and "Watch Beyoncé's Mom Discuss Her Close History With HIV and COVID-19" as well as a profile on Copeland titled "Black Voices Matter" from the January/February issue of POZ.

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